

Dearest Marcella,

My love, in the course of our letters I may not have told you how distressed I become upon seeing skeletons. I find myself revolted by their empty eyes and the unhinged way they walk through the streets at dusk. A better man would be respectful, but – imperfect soul that I am – I've never put flower-crowns on the bare skulls of the dead. Why should I? Scholars have proven the dead do not care for our flowers.

While at the university, I read a treatise describing the scientific studies performed by the Institute of Eutrist. In these, a person in mourning was placed on the path walked by the remains of someone dear to them. The mourner, in their heated state, often interprets small stops and hitches in the movement of the bones to be signs of recognition. The study concluded that the dead show no more recognition for their mothers than they do for strangers. It is as old wives say: "Your dead will pause, and pass on by."

By this, some fishwife might mean it's time to give up old grief, but scientifically the phrase holds as much truth. A skeleton's only measurable intent is to walk the gods' road to the end. They only pause for those who stand in their way.

So is it odd for me to feel this way? When I see skeletons plodding back to the gate of the next world, I have never before seen them as a gentle reminder of life's transience. I see only empty people – brothers, friends, lovers – all hollowed out to nothing.

I am sure that you, my dearheart, have no fear of bones. When we met, I noted how you are as lively and clear-eyed as a jay bird. I envy that. As a physician, even one untried and fresh from the university, I should be used to the dead.

Henceforth, I shall have to be stronger, particularly in light of recent events.

Allow me to explain: I chose for us a house where the main road runs by our doorstep. I could have found a place that wasn't a thoroughfare built on one of the paths of the gods, but I do love to be in the hubbub of life. I love life far more than I hate to see the dead. I'm sure you will enjoy it here, sweet Marcella, when you return from the coastal temple and the terms of our betrothal are complete.

Here, both your family and mine have begun arrangements. Your eldest aunt has conducted several meetings of the family women. It has been made clear to me I must attend each meeting, though my suggestions on our marriage have yet to prove helpful.

Your aunt is particularly keen on the details of color and dress. She is hoping we will have caged butterflies at the service. Certainly, I can bear the expense, but I wanted first to ask you if butterflies were your wish as well as hers.

Please write to your dear lady aunt. I believe your own thoughts on insects and fabric would assuage certain arguments among the good ladies of our soon joined family.

But these small details are not why I've written. Indeed, I believe I am avoiding putting my revelations to the page.

What I truly want to tell you, my sweet one, is that a certain matter (indeed,

one that has cast a shadow over our betrothal) will be resolved.

Last week I was returning from a dinner with friends from the old school. Jeoffry, you probably remember. He and I both met you in Utherdan while you were entertaining suitables.

Ah, but still I delay! No more, sweet one, for this is what has happened.

I left my companions after moon rise. The lamps along the god's road had been lit and were burning brightly. The drinking houses overflowed with noise and laughter. The sweet-cake shop was still open, though it was long past eventide. I remember feeling more at ease than I had in many years.

An old woman called to me, "Take a flower, sir? A flower for a lovely lady?"

Even though you, dear one, are far away, I felt merry. I gave the woman a penny for a boutonnière of violets and secured them to my lapel. It was pure frivolity, since they would hardly be seen as I walked away from the lamplight, singing.

The half-moon had risen. It was much later in the night than anyone would expect to see the dead. So it was an unpleasant surprise when I noted a skeleton walking toward me on the road. The bones were translucent, not solid like the newly dead. The fragile, near-luminance of the thing made me think it had walked a long way. Perhaps the bones had risen far from the road; perhaps it walked for months along a lonely mountain path. My only certainty was that they did not rise from a soft burial on temple hill.

It may surprise you, but I knew as soon as it approached that these were the remains of a woman. I am a trained doctor, but that is not how I knew her. Recognition did not come from the hip bone or some lesson of anatomy. I knew her by the way she moved.

Skeletons move in that unpleasant way of their own, but this one also stepped with a certain grace, a rolling firm-footedness. And I recognized that walk, if nothing else.

It almost stopped my heart to see it, and I stood in the road, reeling like one struck in the head. The skeleton did not pause, and as I watched I noticed a kind of pale, phosphorus light moved within what was once a body. The light throbbed like foxfire; first caged in her ribs, then flickering in her hollow eyes. I've heard of the ghost lights, but I had never seen them before that night. Nor had I believed in them.

Usually, only a certain kind of person will say they can see the lost half of the soul caught within the mortal remains. These types are rarely reputable, being mostly fortune tellers, charm sellers, and a particularly silly species of society-girl. I am none of these things. I am a man of medicine. I know the dead cast no measurable light. It's a mere trick of the dark-adapted eye.

Yet I knew the bones as I knew the footsteps. Marcella, I tell you truly, she was all that remained of my lost Bethany.

I promised your lady aunt that I would never speak of her though I know you must have heard. Now I must confess in full. Please forgive me.

She was no one. Beth was a bootmaker's child; her family without name or property. She knew little of art or poetry, but she could carved buttons to look like unbred roses. I intended to give up everything I had for her; my family, my name my inheritance and prospects.

Instead it was Bethany who left everything behind. She disappeared as though plucked into the sky. I gave up much to be with a woman beneath my class, then lost more in her aftermath. The society of women marked me as a scoundrel. My family feared I'd again mar their name, so I was pinned carefully between the marble fortress of the university and the unsubtle chaperons who dogged my steps should I so much as stroll beyond the grounds.

There have been days I hated poor sweet Beth, thinking her faithless instead of come to harm.

But that night on the road I saw her near-forgotten movements, a full two years from the day I'd tilted between anger and despair. It had taken her far too long to rise from the earth, and there was a deep notch upon her breastbone. I believe now that she had been buried deeply and in secret.

I stepped aside as she drew close. I know there is no point in waylaying the dead, and it is offensive to do so – but my feet felt like stones as I moved away from her. I suppose my heart was breaking, but I cannot be sure. Heartbreak is, after all, a poetic condition, not a medical one.

Beth's walk did not slow as she came, but she turned her empty face to me. Her skeletal hand reached out and she paused, ivory fingertips close to my sleeve. I took her bone fingers gently, then with my free hand tore the boutonnière from my breast – three violets pinned with a paper ribbon. I wish now that I'd had something finer to give her.

Beth's remains held the twist of paper for a moment. Then she raised it to her skull and tipped it gently into the empty socket of her eye. Could such an odd gesture be random? I do not know.

Then she continued on her path, Marcella, like any of the dead. She left me for the last time.

I wept, my dear. I admit to this – I wept in the street.

It is difficult to write, my hand shakes. Forgive me for how the ink runs and pools – I push too hard against the paper – but someone did this!

Someone killed a young woman – and this was the woman I once loved. You never knew Beth, my dear Marcella, though I wish you had. She was as lively and virtuous as yourself.

I know I am now engaged and have other duties, but I am compelled to investigate this death. Justice must be sought in this world, even for the dead. Please understand, my sweet dove, this is something I must do. You deserve a husband whose heart is at peace.

However, be assured that this leaves me free – perhaps more so than I have been in years. Beth is no longer a young love you'll find me sighing over.

I have found her. She is lost.

I swear to you, this will not interfere with the arrangements for this marriage whose prospects have brought much joy to me and both our families.

Marcella, please take this into your heart – the reason I write today is to assure you that I will be loyal. I now have no other ties in this world. Even as I must search for unpleasant truths, I swear I will keep faith with you, both as a husband and as a father to any children we may have.

In life,

Your bridegroom